

# Author Talks: Susan McPherson on building meaningful relationships— in business and in life

In a new book, Susan McPherson offers a road map to unlocking a more meaningful life and enduring relationships.



**In this edition of *Author Talks*,** McKinsey Global Publishing's Raju Narisetti chats with Susan McPherson about her new book, *The Lost Art of Connecting: The Gather, Ask, Do Method for Building Meaningful Business Relationships* (McGraw-Hill, March 2021). The corporate-social-responsibility expert offers practical steps to build real and meaningful networking contacts by tapping into humanity and learning to be more intentional and authentic. An edited version of the conversation follows.

**What problem were you trying to solve with this book?**

I'm super happy with books on networking. We all need to network. But what I started to see over the last several years was this overreliance on technology, as well as our desire for clicks, likes, and numbers of followers growing, which I felt missed the importance of building deeply meaningful personal relationships that span the test of time.

**Disconnected in a connected world**

**What surprised you most about writing this book—in the research or writing?**

There were many aha moments, many surprises during the researching and interviewing of those I call "characters" for the book. And I have to say, the connection between health and our meaningful, deep connections was surprising. You actually live longer if you have deeply personal, long-standing relationships.

Honestly, if readers were to say, "I just want to get more numbers on Twitter," it may not be the best book for them. However, I think by the time they are halfway through, they will see the magic that actually happens when you build deeply meaningful relationships—whether it's having a Rolodex of experts to tap into when you are looking for your next job, or looking for where to go next on a trip, or perhaps looking for a nonprofit that you want to get involved in. It's a lot easier to do that when you have positive, deep relationships rather than just contacts on social media.

**'I have found that when you are more vulnerable and more open, other people are more open, which creates a much richer dynamic to help make the workplace a better place.'**

**Is a ‘my work is my life; my life is my work’ philosophy really for everyone?**

I certainly don't believe that every person has to always be “on.” That is certainly not what I'm suggesting. I have just found—probably since the mid '90s, once email came into our personal and professional lives—that there really was no longer that delineation between your “work self” and your “home self.” So instead of running from it and hiding from it, let's just be our real selves. I have found that when you are more vulnerable and more open, other people are more open, which creates a much richer dynamic to help make the workplace a better place.

I'm not suggesting that we spill all of our personal lives to our professional colleagues. And I realize that if you're not happy in your job, it's very, very hard to want to be part of your job. But I have found the work that I do, personally working in social impact, to be so enriching that the people around me are almost all working within some semblance of social impact. So it has created a very rich and rewarding environment.

**Look within first**

**How does the gather phase help unlock self-discovery?**

The book is divided into three components: the gather phase, the ask phase, and the do phase.

The gather phase—much of it—is looking inside and determining several things. What is the community you want to build around yourself? What are you hoping to accomplish? What would you like to see in one year, three years, five years down the road in terms of the people who are surrounding you? Answering these questions will also help you understand what your desires are, what you bring to the table.

One of the themes through the book is this notion of, how can I help? How can I be of better service

to others? And I have to say, before you can do that, you have to understand the gifts you have. But I will, with 100 percent certainty, state that every single person has something to offer—no matter who they are.

**Is there practical advice for doing research on a person you want to network with?**

The ask-phase portion of the book actually helps you ask the right question so that you can have a meaningful conversation. And there's even, in one of the chapters, the seven questions to ask that can elicit meaningful responses. And the beautiful thing is, for young and old today, we have so many resources at our fingertips before we meet someone to find out so much about them—for good *and* bad. The element of surprise is almost gone. But if there is somebody you know you are going to see or meet at an event, whether it's a virtual event or an in-person event, you can go to LinkedIn, you can go to Twitter, you can go to Instagram, and you can find out so much about that person. So when it does come time to actually speak, you already have so much information in your toolbox.

But I would try to get away from the conversations like, “What's the weather like?” or “What did you have for lunch?” Instead ask questions like, “When this pandemic ends, where in the world do you want to go?” or “What has been most challenging for you over the last 12 months?” or “Is there anything that you feel could be helpful to get you through the next few months before we can come back into reality?”

One fun tip from the book that I love to talk about is that we all have FOMO [fear of missing out]. We had it as soon as social media started. In fact, I think I had FOMO long before social media, when I knew there was a party going on, and I wasn't invited. But now, we see in 24 hours all of the events that are happening that somehow we didn't get an invitation to.

‘We all have FOMO. We had it as soon as social media started.... But I decided that I am going to create “JOMO.” And instead of joy of missing out, which is what people immediately think of when they hear JOMO, it is the joy of meeting others.’

When this phenomenon first started, I decided that I am going to create “JOMO.” And instead of joy of missing out, which is what people immediately think of when they hear JOMO, it is the joy of meeting others.

Create your own gathering—and that gathering can be virtual. I just hosted a book talk last night

and had 25 people join. And I did that myself, just inviting people. But it doesn’t have to be 25 people. You can do it with four people. Get together and have a conversation about anything under the sun. But the point is, if you’re the convener, you’re not being invited. You’re doing the inviting. So think of it as the joy of meeting others.

**Susan McPherson** is the founder and CEO of McPherson Strategies. **Raju Narisetti**, based in McKinsey’s New York office, is the publisher of McKinsey Global Publishing.

Designed by McKinsey Global Publishing  
Copyright © 2021 McKinsey & Company. All rights reserved.